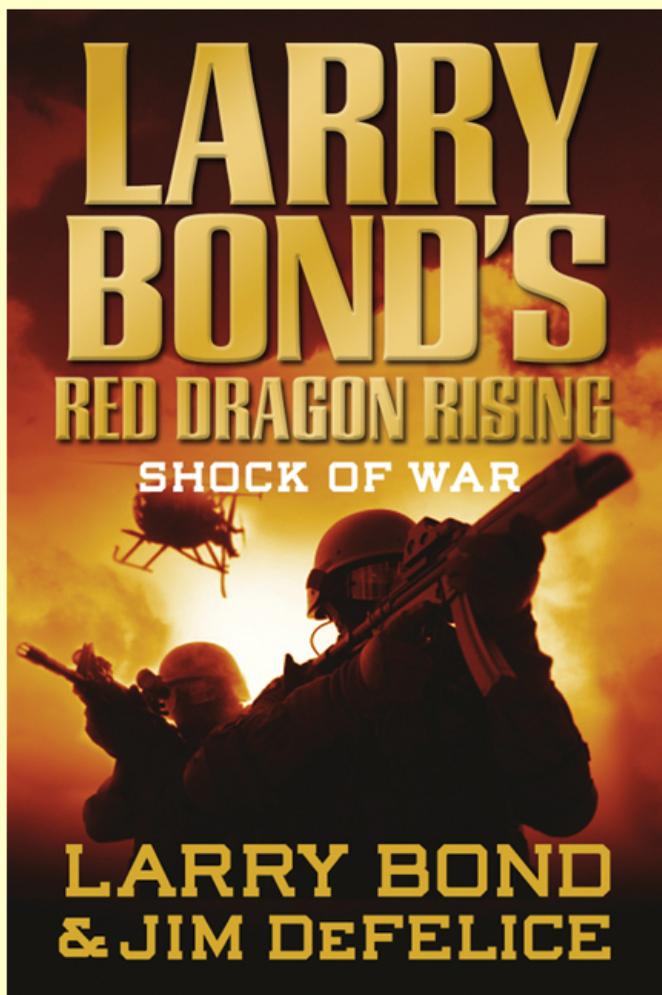


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This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations,  
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LARRY BOND'S RED DRAGON RISING: SHOCK OF WAR

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# 1

## Beijing

*Premier Cho Lai watched* the American on the video screen dispassionately, willing himself to study the man and what he said with the mind of a scientist and observer. The American's message was one of venom, directed at Cho and his people, the Chinese country, and especially the Chinese army. It made Cho boil with anger and lust for vengeance. He wanted with all his heart to punch his hand through the video screen, to smash it—or better, to punch through the screen and somehow take this Josh MacArthur by his skinny, blotchy neck and strangle him. Cho could almost feel the boy's thorax collapsing beneath his hands.

*Boy.*

That was what he was. Not a scientist, not a man—a boy. A rodent. Scum.

No one would take him seriously if not for the images he'd brought back. They flashed on the screen as the scum's voice continued to speak. The Chinese translation played across the bottom of the screen, but Cho had no need for it; he spoke English reasonably well, and in any event the images themselves told the story.

All of his careful planning to make the invasion look as if the Vietnamese had instigated the war was threatened by this scum. It mattered nothing to Vietnam—Vietnam would be crushed no matter what the world thought. China needed its rice and oil, and it would have it.

But this threatened the next step. For Cho knew that his country's appetite was insatiable. The people who thronged the streets of Beijing not far from his compound were desperately short of food. Keeping them satisfied was an impossible task.

Impossible for anyone but him. The last two governments had toppled in rapid succession, each lasting less than two short months thanks to food riots and dissension. Cho had used the unrest to maneuver himself

to power, promising to end the disturbances. He would remain in power only as long as he could keep that promise. It was not that he had any enemies—the most prominent had met unfortunate accidents over the past few months, or else been exposed in corruption trials, or, in a few cases, bought off with timely appointments outside the country. But as his own rise had shown, it was not the prominent one who had to fear in the chaos of the moment; it was the obscure. Cho had risen from a job as lieutenant governor for agriculture in the parched western provinces. Two years before, no one in Beijing would even have known his name. Now they bowed to him.

As the world would.

But first, this danger must be dealt with. America, the world, must not be brought into the conflict. The giant must not be awakened, until it was too late for it to stop the inevitable momentum of Chinese conquest.

Cho snapped off the video. He had seen enough.

## 2

### **Hainan Island, China**

*Major Zeus Murphy* tried not to look too conspicuous as he walked down the concourse toward his flight. In theory, he had nothing to fear: the United States and China were not at war, and while his U.S. passport had caused a few seconds of hesitation at the security gate, the check of his baggage had been perfunctory at best. But theory and reality did not always mesh, especially in this case: the war between China and Vietnam had greatly strained relations between the two countries, and even in the best times Chinese customs officials and local police were not exactly known for being evenhanded when dealing with citizens from other countries.

And in this case, Zeus had a little extra to fear: he had just led a guerilla operation against the Chinese naval fleet gathered in the har-

bor, hopefully preventing it from launching an attack against the Vietnamese.

He could see the red glow of distant flames reflecting in the dark glass of the passageway as he walked toward the gate. Too much time had passed for the fire to be on one of the boats they had blown up; Zeus suspected instead it was due to friendly fire, panic set off by the supposed attack of Vietnamese submarines on the landing ships that were gathered in the port.

All for the better.

A television screen hung on the wall near the gate ahead. Zeus slowed down to get a look. In the U.S., it would be set to a local or all-news station; by now it would be carrying live feeds from the attack, breathless correspondents warning of the coming apocalypse. Here it showed some sort of Chinese soap opera, or maybe a reality show; he couldn't quite tell and didn't want to make himself too conspicuous by stopping.

He passed two more screens as he walked. Both were set to Chinese financial news stations. Though it was night here, it was still daytime in the U.S., and tickers showed stock prices across the bottom.

A lot of red letters and down arrows, Zeus noticed. War wasn't good for anyone's economy.

"I thought you'd never get here," said Win Christian, who rose from a seat across from the television.

Christian was also a major, was also in the U.S. Army, and had also just helped blow up part of the invasion fleet. The two men had snuck ashore with the help of a Vietnamese agent, assumed identities as businessmen, and headed for the easiest way out—a Chinese flight to Hong Kong, and from there to Japan.

Zeus nodded. They'd gotten into different lines at the security checkpoint, splitting up in case they were stopped.

"Where's the girl?" Christian asked, referring to the Vietnamese agent, Solt Jan.

"I thought she was with you," answered Zeus.

Christian seemed even more nervous than he had earlier. Fidgeting, his eyes shifted continually, glancing in every direction. "I hope she didn't bail."

"We got our tickets. Relax."

Christian glanced around. There were about forty people at the gate, waiting for the 11 p.m. flight to Hong Kong. The destination was written in English as well as Chinese on a whiteboard that sat on an easel next to the podium in front of the door to the plane tunnel. The door was closed, and the podium itself was roped off by a velvet-covered chain. There were no attendants nearby.

Zeus glanced at his watch.

“Half hour before boarding,” he told Christian. “Let’s get something to eat.”

“You think that’s wise?”

Zeus started toward a kiosk about ten meters away in the center of the gate area. Maybe some food would calm Christian down.

“Guess it can’t be any worse than Vietnamese food,” said Christian, catching up.

Zeus closed his eyes at the word *Vietnamese*. He glanced at Christian, who’d turned beet red.

“I know,” muttered Christian almost inaudibly. “Sorry.”

Zeus didn’t reply. At least Christian realized he’d been an idiot; they were making progress.

The vendor was a few years younger than Zeus, twenty-one or twenty-two at most. Zeus pointed at a bag of American-style potato chips.

“Ten yuan,” said the young man in English.

Zeus dug into his pocket. Solt had given him some Chinese money on the way over. He had some American money in his wallet as well—fifty dollars, barely enough to bribe the passport control people in Hong Kong, which would be necessary to get to Tokyo since his passport lacked the proper visa stamps.

“Here are your crisps,” said the man, using the British term for the snack as he handed them over.

“I’ll have a bag, too,” said Christian.

The man kept his eyes locked on Zeus’s. It was a menacing stare, a dare.

*Why?*

“My change,” said Zeus.

The man’s mouth twisted into a smile. Zeus held out his hand. The man looked down at it, and for a moment Zeus thought he was going to spit. Instead, he reached into the cash register. He took a bill and some coins, then dropped them into Zeus’s outstretched palm.

Zeus locked his eyes on the man, not even bothering to count the change.

"All of it," he said.

The clerk's smile broadened. He reached into the register and fished out the right change, placing it into Zeus's hand.

"What the hell was that about?" Christian asked as they walked back to the gate.

"Got me," said Zeus.

"He spoke English pretty well."

"Yeah," said Zeus. "Good enough."

An airline employee had appeared at the podium and was fiddling with a microphone. She began to speak as Zeus and Christian approached. A few passengers got up from their seats; the rest looked anxiously toward her as she continued.

"What's she saying?" Christian asked.

"I didn't learn to speak Chinese in the last twenty minutes," snapped Zeus. "Did you?"

He reached into his pocket for his ticket, expecting she was trying to organize the boarding—probably asking for people with small children first. But no one moved forward.

A short, balding man near the gate began speaking to the woman, haranguing her in slightly angry Chinese. Zeus turned around, looking for Solt. She should have met them by now.

Admittedly, she hadn't told him that she'd been on the flight; he'd just assumed that when she pressed the ticket into his hand in the lobby before disappearing in the crowd.

"They're not moving," said Christian. "What's going on?"

"Flight cancel," said a grim-faced man nearby. He added something in Chinese.

"Excuse me," said Zeus. "The flight's canceled? Why?"

The man shook his head.

Zeus tried repeating the question, phrasing it more simply and speaking slower. "Why is the flight canceled?"

"Flight cancel," said the man. "Problem at airport. All flight."

"Shit," said Christian.

"Is it temporary?" asked Zeus.

Again, the man shook his head, not understanding. The passengers at the podium moved closer to the woman, apparently asking questions.

“Do you know . . . the next flight? When?” asked Zeus, trying to simplify what he wanted to know. “Is there another flight?”

The man said something in Chinese. Zeus didn’t understand the words, but the meaning itself was clear: He had no idea.

Most of the people at the gate remained in their seats. Zeus guessed that the airline was making other arrangements, and they had been told to wait.

Or maybe not. Maybe the entire airport was closed. Maybe they thought they were under attack.

He told himself to calm down, to relax and think it through. He was a businessman, not a saboteur—be aggravated, annoyed, not alarmed.

“What are we going to do?” Christian asked.

“I’ll ask what the story is,” said Zeus. “Maybe some of the airline people speak English. Come on.”

“Right behind you,” hissed Christian.

They joined the small knot of people near the attendant. Zeus stood patiently, hoping to hear someone speaking English. He didn’t.

The people around him were mostly men, speaking quickly and not very politely. The woman fended them off with short bursts, giving as good as she got. It struck him that she was speaking the universal language of airline gate attendants: *Sorry, you’re shit out of luck.*

“Excuse me,” said Zeus as the cacophony around him hit a lull. “Do you speak English?”

“Flight cancel,” said the woman.

“Why?”

She turned to another passenger, who was saying something else. By the time she turned back in Zeus’s direction, it was obvious she had forgotten what he had said.

“Is there another flight?” asked Zeus. “Will there *be* another flight? To Hong Kong?”

“Oh, yes.”

“When is the flight?”

Again she started to turn away to answer a different passenger. Zeus reached forward and touched her arm. The woman jerked back.

“I’m sorry,” said Zeus. “When is the flight?”

“No flight,” said the woman. She added something in Chinese, then began answering a man to Zeus’s right.

Deciding he wasn't going to get any more information from her, Zeus took a few steps back.

The first order of business was to look for Solt Jan. Zeus turned to his left and faced the large aisle at the center of the gate area. He began scanning the faces of the crowd, examining each one in turn. The Vietnamese agent was a small woman, thin and petite. *Pretty* and petite. Dark hair, exotic looks: Asian and something else as well, probably Western, French maybe, or even Scandinavian.

Zeus turned almost completely around without spotting her.

"What do you think?" Christian's voice trembled.

"She must have gone back into the city," said Zeus. "It's just as well; they might suspect her. Let's just play this through. We find an airline person who speaks English. We're businessmen, stranded because of our flight. Just play it through."

"What if we can't get to Hong Kong?"

Zeus shook his head. There were plenty of alternatives.

"I don't like this," said Christian.

"Here. Have some crisps."

Zeus held the top of the bag in his two hands and began pulling the sides apart slowly, trying to keep the bag intact as he ripped it. It required a certain amount of finesse, strength, and restraint at the same time.

The bag top separated cleanly. He held the chips out to Christian. "Here," he said. "Have one."

Someone tapped Zeus from behind. He spun around, surprised.

"You are Mr. Murphy," said a short man in a Chinese army uniform. It didn't sound like a question.

"Excuse me?"

"You are Murphy?"

Zeus hesitated. If he said no and the man asked for his passport, then what would he do? Run?

Zeus looked at his uniform. It was light tan. He was an officer, a captain.

What did the insignia mean? Air force?

Would the airline have sent him?

*We're not at war. Relax.*

The officer started to put out his hand; Zeus guessed that he was about to ask for his ID.

“I’m Murphy,” he admitted.

The Chinese officer said nothing, turning instead to Christian.

“You are Christian,” he said.

Christian had nearly crossed his eyes. He looked at Zeus, undoubtedly wondering why the hell he had agreed.

Play it through, Zeus thought. We’re businessmen.

“Mr. Christian?” repeated the officer.

“Yes?” said Christian finally.

“You are to come with me.”

The officer turned sharply. Two other men, these in blue uniforms, stood a short distance away, watching. Zeus noticed that they had un-snapped to the protective strap at the top of their holsters, allowing free access to their sidearms.

“What’s going on?” asked Christian.

The officer stopped abruptly. He wore a deep frown.

“You will follow me,” he said again, in a voice that brooked no argument.



### **UN building, New York City**

*Josh MacArthur reached* into his pocket for a tissue to blow his nose before remembering that he had used the last one a few minutes ago. He closed his eyes as he sneezed, his whole body shaking with the force.

“Allergies,” he mumbled, getting up from his seat. “I just . . . need . . . a . . . tish—”

He sneezed before he could finish the sentence.

Mumbling another apology, Josh made his way to the private restroom at the side of the office, pushing through the door as his body was wracked by a quick success of sneezes.

*Damn allergies!*

His allergies had saved his life in Vietnam. But on the whole, he would just as well do without them.

There were no more tissues in the box on the shelf above the sink. Josh grabbed a length of toilet paper and unfurled it, folding it over quickly and then trying to clear the mess from his nose. It was a lost cause, as were antihistamines, saline sprays, and all manner of remedies he'd tried over the years. Removing the allergen was the only *real* solution.

But what the hell was the allergen here, midway up the UN building, in the middle of a block of offices whose windows didn't even open?

Josh sneezed again. He cleared his nose, dumped some of the paper into the toilet, and flushed. He sneezed, blew his nose, then felt his sinuses clear a bit.

Sneezing fit finally over, he turned to the sink and ran the cold water, splashing on it on his face. He looked at himself in the mirror. He looked more than a little worse for wear.

Josh patted his face dry—rubbing his eyes would only make them hurt even more—then took a deep breath, trying to relax.

There was a tap on the door.

"You, uh, all right in there, Josh?" asked William Jablonski, a political consultant to the President who'd been pressed into service as his minder and media adviser. Jablonski slurred the "sh"; with his deep voice, it sounded as if he were hushing him.

"Yeah, yeah. Just getting my breath back."

"The reporters have a few more questions."

"Yup."

Josh sat on the closed seat of the toilet and unrolled some more toilet tissue. When he'd been stuck behind the lines in Vietnam, he'd dreamed of the chance to tell the world what he had seen. That goal had kept him going, kept him alive. But at this point he really could use a break. A little more of a rest.

The questions were the same, over and over. He repeated the answers practically word for word:

**Where did this happen?**

*Vietnam, the jungles near the Chinese border.*

**You saw all of this with your own eyes?**

*Yes.*

**How did you escape?**

*I had a phone—some SEALs were sent. And I guess, uh, some Army guys.*

The last answer was, if not quite a lie, certainly not the whole truth. CIA officer Mara Duncan had been the person who found him in the jungle and truly saved him—the CIA had tracked his phone signal, then sent Mara to find and rescue him. But mentioning her—mentioning the agency’s involvement at all—would blow her cover, ending her usefulness in Southeast Asia, and probably ending or at least harming her career.

So he left her out of the answers.

“Josh?” asked Jablonski through the door.

“Yeah?”

“You sure you’re all right?”

“I’m good.”

“The people from WINS have, uh, a deadline thing that they are hoping to meet. They want to talk, uh, about the bridge.”

“I’ll be out in just a sec,” Josh told him.

“Sure.”

The bridge. Someone had tried to blow him up, to stop him from getting to the UN. Those questions were harder to answer, since he wasn’t exactly sure who it was.

He *was* sure—he saw the man in his mind’s eye: early twenties, thin face, shaved head. Chinese, definitely Chinese.

Determined expression. Cold, hollow eyes.

*Can’t they all just go away?*

Suddenly he felt ashamed of himself. The people in Vietnam whose bodies he’d seen—they would gladly trade places with him. Mạ, the little girl he’d rescued: What would she think?

Josh rose, blew his nose again, then opened the door.

“All right,” he said to the reporters as he emerged. “Where were we?”